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Overflight

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Flights and Fliers

Ex-U2 Pilot Gary Powers Smiles — Keeps His Secrets

By CHARLES TRACY
Aviation Writer

There's probably a deep, lingering secret behind the amused and smiling eyes of Francis Gary Powers.

He gives the impression that he still holds a winning ace in the fascinating game of espionage he played with the Russians and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

AND HE ADMITS that some facts were purposely omitted from his recently published book, "Operation Overflight," in which he breaks a 10-year silence to give his first personal account of the world-shaking U-2 spy plane affair.

It's a remarkable suspense story of the most successful aerial reconnaissance espionage project in history.

The U-2 incident wrecked a Summit Conference, gave birth to the Government's credibility gap and inaugurated a new era in the ancient art of spying.

Powers discussed his sensational adventures in an exclusive Press interview during his recent visit to Cleveland.

WHAT REALLY knocked him from the stratosphere over Central Russia May 1, 1960?

He says it was a Russian

SAM-2 missile fired from the ground that exploded under the tail of his Lockheed U-2 high-altitude jet, destroying its sensitive controls, ripping away its fragile 80-foot wings which fluttered like paper to Soviet soil.

He battled to escape the wildly gyrating cockpit, was thrown out but entangled in his oxygen line, never able to trip destruct switches to disintegrate secret cameras aboard.

Descending by parachute he watched the wings flutter by and saw the fuselage crash. He and his wrecked spy plane including a partly burned map of his route became Soviet prizes, forcing President Eisenhower to make the unprecedented admission that he had authorized espionage as a "distasteful but vital necessity."

HOW HIGH was he when hit?

That remains one of his secrets. It was higher than 70,000 feet but under 100,000. It was a key point because U-2 success was based on its extreme altitude, being above range of Russian missiles or aircraft.

During his Soviet trial, Powers says he tried vainly to emphasize he was shot down from 68,000 feet to protect his buddies who

may have been sent on similar missions later.

Was his shoot-down staged by CIA to reveal to the world that the U.S. had made hundreds of flights over Russia while the Soviets claimed an impregnable defense?

Powers laughed and said, "If so they kept it a secret from me."

HE HAS NO bitterness for anyone involved in the project.

"I admire the CIA and our Government for undertaking the program. I know it provided vital maps for our missile defense. We had rockets but no data to direct them.

"The U-2's exposed the Russian bomber hoax and alerted us to Soviet emphasis on missiles which possibly saved millions of lives. My only regret is that we didn't make more U-2 flights because we had the opportunity, the pilots and planes.

"While I might wish that many of the things that followed had never happened, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I served my country — and I believe, well."

To most fellow pilots, he's a hero.